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TAGS: PREF PREL FAID MOPS IZ JO
SUBJECT: 950 ASYLUM SEEKERS AT JORDAN-IRAQ BORDER, UNHCR
CROSS BORDER OPERATIONS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

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Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) The GOJ is not admitting most asylum seekers to the UNHCR refugee camp at Ruweished. As of mid-day on April 22, 950 people (roughly 800 Iranian Kurds, 50 Iranian oppositionists and 100 Palestinians) are being held in no-man's land between the Iraqi and Jordanian border posts, where they are receiving assistance from UNHCR and its implementing partners. Senior GOJ officials, who view the Iranians as a security threat and a potential long-term refugee population, have made it clear to UNHCR and us that none of them will be admitted to Jordan. The GOJ is pressing UNHCR to establish a camp for the Iranian asylum-seekers inside Iraqi territory. In return, the GOJ is promising to admit Iraqis and Palestinians to the UNHCR refugee camp at Ruweished. Late on April 21, the GOJ admitted to the UNHCR camp 94 Palestinians with family ties to Jordan. UNHCR/Amman recognizes the need for cross-border operations but needs UNHCR/Geneva approval and guarantees -- including that coalition forces inside Iraq can establish a secure environment for a camp. We view the establishment of UNHCR cross-border operations as the only practical solution to this increasingly difficult problem. End summary.

THE PROBLEM

12. (U) Since April 12, a steady and growing stream of asylum seekers (totaling 950 on April 22) has made its way toward the Karameh/Trebil border crossing. The GOJ has denied entry to this group, holding it in the roughly 2-km wide strip of land between the Iraqi and Jordanian border posts. GOJ border officials confirmed that this land, generally referred to as "no-man's land," actually is Jordanian territory. The asylum seekers are comprised of the following groups:

- (U) At least 800 Iranian Kurds from UNHCR's Al Tash refugee camp, located near the Iraqi city of Ar-Ramadi. (According to UNHCR, total population in Al Tash camp is approximately 13,000, comprised of Iranian Kurds who first sought refuge in Iraq in 1982.) This group began arriving on April 13 and is composed almost entirely of families. Their stated reasons for leaving Iraq range from a lack of humanitarian services in Al Tash camp to a general breakdown of law and order and fear of reprisals following the fall of the Iraqi government. UNHCR believes that there most likely is a lack of basic humanitarian services in Al Tash camp, as UNHCR withdrew its expatriate staff from Iraq before hostilities and cannot confirm whether local staff is still at work. UNHCR also reports that its implementing partner for Al Tash camp had been the Iraqi Red Crescent which has "disintegrated" during the war. UNHCR is unable to send expatriate staff back into Al Tash camp -- even to conduct an assessment -- until coalition forces and then UNSECOORD declare the area to be permissive. UNHCR has been unable to conduct detailed interviews with this group, due to the chaotic and constantly changing conditions at NML. We and UNHCR assume this influx will continue until the core problems at Al Tash camp are resolved.

- (C) An estimated 50-60 Iranians who have identified themselves as oppositionists and may have ties to Mujaheddin-e-Khalq. A total of 96 such Iranians arrived in several groups April 12-13. They are mostly men (only 12 women) and all are unmarried. They all are carrying travel documents, but most are expired refugee convention travel documents issued by western European countries. Three are carrying expired US-issued refugee travel documents. UNHCR

reports that some members of this group whose travel documents have been found to be invalid have willingly returned to Iraq. Another five are carrying valid French and Canadian passports and were allowed to enter Jordan April 21 en route to France and Canada. Two Iranians are carrying valid Australian passports but have been denied entry to Jordan by GOJ border guards. GOJ officials have announced -- including to the press -- that they will not admit this group to Jordan (see para 6). UNHCR understands that this group could have ties to a terrorist organization and is not urging the GOJ to admit its members to the UNHCR refugee camp at Ruweished.

- (U) An estimated 100-150 Palestinians, carrying a mix of Iraqi and Egyptian travel documents -- or no documents at all. Some members of this group have family ties to Jordan. Late on April 21, the GOJ allowed 94 Palestinians from "mixed" families -- e.g., those with some Jordanian passport holders -- to enter the UNHCR refugee camp at Ruweished. UNHCR officials advise that another 80 Palestinians will be admitted to the UNHCR refugee camp later today, April 22. The GOJ previously allowed a separate group of 40 Palestinians to come to Amman on a temporary basis, with guarantees from Jordanian family members that the entry truly would be temporary. Palestinians in no-man's land have told UNHCR protection officers that they are being threatened by Iraqis, told that they were "guests" of Saddam who no longer are welcome in Iraq. Others have told UNHCR that they were evicted from their homes by Iraqis.

THE PRACTICALITIES

13. (U) All of the above groups, plus a smattering of Iraqis and other nationalities with document problems, are being held in the roughly 2 km-wide "no-man's land" (NML) between the Jordanian and Iraqi border posts. This "no-man's land" actually belongs to the Government of Jordan, as its territory extends to the Iraqi border post. UNHCR and its implementing partners are providing services to the NML population. UNHCR has erected tents and rubb halls and is providing non-food items (blankets, cook stoves, hygiene kits, etc.) to each family upon arrival. UNHCR implementing partner Oxfam is providing water and sanitation facilities. UNHCR implementing partner CARE is supporting overall "camp" management, including tent set up and food distribution. MSF and UNHCR implementing partner Japan Platform are providing medical services. Food currently is being provided on ad hoc basis by UNHCR, ICRC, Jordan Red Crescent and its NGO implementing partners in the TCN transit camp. UNHCR has not established an overall "camp" management system -- registration lists, food ration cards and an organized security and protection system -- due to the temporary nature of the arrangement. UNHCR also reports that it has been unable to conduct thorough interviews of individual asylum seekers, due to the chaotic and ever-changing circumstances in this area.

14. (U) On April 20, UNHCR -- in cooperation with GOJ implementing partner the Hashemite Charitable Organization (HCO) -- decided to expand capacity in NML to provide services for 5,000 people. UNHCR reports that accommodations for 5,000 inside NML will be "tight" with little space between tents and tents set up right to the edge of the highway. UNHCR acknowledges that security and protection would be difficult in such circumstances.

THE GOJ'S POSITION

15. (C) From our earliest discussions with the GOJ on possible Iraq-related refugee flows (reflets), the GOJ has made it clear it would not permit Iranians or Palestinian asylum seekers to enter Jordan. Yet it nevertheless signed a letter of understanding (LOU) with UNHCR in which it agreed to provide "temporary protection" to "persons in need of humanitarian assistance caused by possible hostilities ... in Iraq." When, in an April 20 meeting, the Ambassador reminded Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Shaher Bak of the GOJ's obligations under the LOU, both officials replied that, due to security concerns, Iranians would not be permitted to enter Jordan. Bak subsequently delivered the same message to UNHCR Representative Sten Bronee in an April 21 meeting. Minister of Information Mohammed Adwan went public with the same message on April 21, telling the press that the GOJ would only allow Iranian Kurds and oppositionists to enter

Jordan on the condition that "they will leave immediately after that," en route to other countries. Adwan also said that the GOJ will facilitate the establishment of a camp for Iranians near the Jordanian border, but inside Iraqi territory.

16. (S) The GOJ views the Iranian Kurds from Al Tash camp as a long-term refugee problem that must be addressed by coalition forces and UNHCR. As FonMin Muasher told the Ambassador April 20, coalition forces must restore security to Al Tash camp and create conditions appropriate for the Kurds' return to Al Tash camp. UNHCR must also restore services inside the camp. If UNHCR has been unable to resettle this group since 1982, why should Jordan open its borders and become host to yet another long-term refugee population? Separately, the GOJ views the Iranian oppositionists as both a potential security threat and a political headache. Muasher confirmed to the Ambassador on April 21 that the Iranian Government had requested that the GOJ arrest and extradite to Iran the presumed MEK supporters, a political and human rights problem the GOJ seeks to avoid. The GOJ seems content to leave this group in NML until its members are moved to a third country, choose to return to Iraq or can be deported to coalition forces' control for internment.

17. (C) The question of the Palestinians is both more complicated and potentially more manageable, should the numbers remain small. With enormous pressure not to allow Israeli "transfer" of Palestinians from the West Bank, the GOJ is reluctant to allow the "transfer" of Palestinians from Iraq to Jordan. Given its historical absorption of Palestinians following every major regional conflict since 1948, the GOJ also worries that it will be forced to accept another large influx of Palestinians from Iraq, an economic burden the GOJ feels it is unable to accommodate. Yet given the numerous family ties between Palestinians in Iraq and Jordan, the GOJ also faces internal political pressures to allow at least some displaced Palestinians to enter Jordan. The GOJ allowed 40 to do so in early April, as long as their relatives in Jordan provided guarantees that the stay truly would be temporary. We expect the GOJ will ultimately allow this current group of Palestinians to enter Jordan as well. MinState Bak offered such a "deal" to UNHCR on April 21, promising to admit all Palestinians if UNHCR would set up a camp for the Iranians inside Iraqi territory.

THE POSSIBLE SOLUTION

18. (C) Although UNHCR would like to continue pressing the GOJ to uphold its first asylum obligations, UNHCR Representative Sten Bronee understands that the GOJ will not let the Iranians or the Iranian Kurds into the (nearly empty) UNHCR refugee camp at Ruweished. UNHCR also realizes that establishing a camp for thousands of people in a very limited physical space where their status remains uncertain is not a viable solution. Bronee has told us he is considering establishing cross-border operations, but cannot make that decision without UNHCR/Geneva's approval. He also said that UNHCR as an institution cannot agree to cross-border operations until it has key guarantees from the GOJ, donors and coalition forces regarding cross-border access for UNHCR staff, logistical and infrastructure support for a new camp, access to Jordan for critically ill asylum seekers (the nearest hospital is in Ruweished, Jordan), financial support for a camp inside Iraq, and -- from coalition forces -- guarantees for camp security requirements. Finally, Bronee reported that he has requested an UNSECOORD assessment of the immediate cross-border area (an important first step in establish cross-border operations) as well as of Al Tash camp.

COMMENT -- AND SUGGESTIONS ON USG NEXT STEPS

19. (C) This rapidly growing population of asylum seekers is causing difficult political problems. We, the GOJ and UNHCR all believe that the current arrangements in NML are neither adequate nor long-term, especially if Al Tash camp continues to bleed refugees. From both a political and practical perspective, we view the establishment of UNHCR cross-border operations as the only solution.

10. (S) In order to prepare the groundwork for what we see as an eventual UNHCR-run camp inside Iraqi territory, we suggest the following next steps:

- A formal message of support (political and financial) from PRM to UNHCR/Geneva on cross-border operations in western Iraq.
- Initiation of CENTCOM discussions with UNHCR over security requirements for a camp in western Iraq.
- Designation of appropriate coalition forces to meet camp security needs.

11. (S) We also request that CENTCOM conduct a civil affairs assessment of Al Tash camp as quickly as possible, to determine the root causes of the population flow from the camp. If security is a problem in the camp, we also request that CENTCOM designate appropriate forces that would enable UN agencies to re-establish operations inside Al Tash camp.

GNEHM